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MONSIEUR LEGER

Several years before the Great War darkened the world we spent a winter in Southern France, on the Riviera.

Our small hotel *a prix modérés* was situated on a sunny hill-top in a quiet street of Cannes. From our windows we looked down upon palm-trees and flower-beds. Roses entwined the balconies. At night the frogs croaked loudly in the garden and breezes, laden with a thousand perfumes, stole in at the windows.

The hotel was kept by a worthy Vaudois family. The establishment was mainly patronized by English maiden ladies. They arrived in considerable numbers every year and remained for the entire season. The masculine element in this decorous environment was a personal friend of the proprietor's, a small elderly Frenchman. He had silvery white hair and dark eyes which were full of tragedy and gentleness. His manners can be described by no lesser word than beautiful. Though unassuming and retiring he was yet equal to any occasion, with a quiet adequacy of bearing which is the fine flower of French good breeding.

As time went on we became better acquainted with this quaint Parisian. He knew the surrounding country well and frequently acted as our guide about the environs of Cannes. We liked to climb the winding, gradually ascending roads between high walls whose gateways afforded glimpses of gardens lying like Elysian fields, where the eye lost itself in flowery vistas swimming in sunlight. Far below flashed the Mediterranean. Against the horizon glowed the purple Esterel Mountains. Above us the wind-swept pine woods added a wilder note. Rich-hued roses drooped tantalizingly over the walls. How still it was, save for the songs of the birds which revelled in those quiet, luxurious gardens.

Gradually we came to know something of Monsieur Léger's personal history, of general interest on account of the prominent literary and historical characters with whom his youth was as-

sociated. The following is an outline of his life as he gave it to us. He belonged to a family *de bonne bourgeoisie*. When a young man he had taken part in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71. His mother, whom he loved profoundly and who was his ideal of womanhood, did not long survive the hardships of this period.

Monsieur Léger was by nature *un sensitif*. His health having been affected by exposure in service and by grief, he developed tuberculosis, which necessitated a residence of several years in Southern France. Later he returned to Paris and continued his work as mechanical engineer. Poor health, however, caused him to retire from business comparatively early in life. With the passing years he became more and more of a recluse. A lonely old man, having outlived most of his family and circle of friends, he decided to give up his Paris home and to spend the rest of his life in Southern France. It was then that we made his acquaintance.

Whenever he mentioned *les Prussiens*, his expressive eyes grew black with horror and indignation. They were to him as foul fiends who had destroyed his world. But even his sensitive intuition could not have forecast the present cataclysm, his country's rebaptism in blood.

We found he liked to tell us of the home days when he and his parents were together in Paris. Although not of the nobility they knew the people worth knowing.

It was in 1869 that Monsieur Léger as a young man spent charming evenings in the home of the historian Guizot. Monsieur Guizot was living with his daughter and her husband in a fine apartment, Rue Billaut (Champs Élysées). Monsieur Guizot's daughter, a gracious personality, and successful writer of children's books, married Monsieur Cornélie De Witt, a deputy. They had two charming children. Monsieur Léger described the historian Guizot as tall, thin, and *spirituel*, of genial mien in the intimate circle. Monsieur Léger's parents, although Roman Catholics, appreciated none the less the protestant Guizot, whose integrity of character was such that it stood in the way of his political success. Monsieur Leger said that Guizot as minister under Louis Philippe did not make the necessary concessions,

consequently the fall of Louis Philippe and the establishment of the republic.

At the same period Monsieur Léger was also often a guest at the soirées of Mme. de Lasteyrie, a descendant of our Lafayette, then sixty years of age. Her salon (Avenue Friedland, Champs Élysées) was one of the few where the real *esprit français* still existed.

She had known how to preserve all the merits of the *ancien régime* without its defects. Monsieur Léger described her with enthusiasm,—her curling, powdered hair, her chic and elegance, above all, her powers as a conversationalist. She had, together with the facility for self-expression, the still greater gift of putting others at their best. Her son, a charming fellow, in temperament like his mother, was destined for a diplomatic career. Monsieur Léger mentioned a Lafayette celebration in America at which her son, Monsieur de Lasteyrie, was the guest of honor.

A neighbor of Mme. de Lasteyrie was Mme. de Balzac living in her Hôtel, Rue Balzac. Monsieur Léger called upon her with mutual friends. He described the widow of the great novelist as *une étrangère*, tall and distinguished looking. She had preserved the furnishings of the mansion exactly as they had been in Balzac's life. Monsieur Léger said the effect was most impressive, the rooms seeming sombre and weird, full of the author's personality.

Mme. de Balzac bought a circular chapel adjoining her *hôtel* where she established a museum containing objects associated with her husband's life and work. She had as a neighbor the Baronne Nathaniel de Rothschild. As the Hôtel de Balzac was enclosed in the Rothschild property the baroness offered large sums for it, wishing to enlarge her domain. But the widow Balzac persisted in her refusal to sell.

Monsieur Léger was well acquainted with Mademoiselle Kestner, who belonged to a prominent Alsatian family. She and her father and brothers were most agreeable in social intercourse. Monsieur Léger's acquaintance with the family continued after Mlle. Kestner's marriage. Her husband, Jules Ferry, was a member of the opposition under the second em-

pire, the period of Napoleon III. At the time the republic was proclaimed, September 4, 1870, he was chosen a member of the provisory government. Jules Ferry laid the foundations of the republic, of which he became successively prime minister and president of the Senate. At one time he was nearly elected President of the Republic. But his independence of character and his valuable services had won him too many enemies. He always preferred defeat to yielding. Monsieur Léger remembered Jules Ferry as having in social life somewhat the *tenue* of a lawyer. He was a gifted conversationalist, a man of serious tastes.

The Ferrys lived in the same street as Guizot. After Mlle. Kestner's marriage to Jules Ferry her father and grandmother lived together not far from Monsieur Léger's home. According to our narrator Grandmother Kestner was an extraordinarily interesting Alsatian type. An old woman of immense energy and vitality, and still handsome, she was republican by conviction, but in reality more arbitrary than a queen. In a little villa adjoining the Kestners lived "la Princesse Mathilde," aunt of Victor Napoleon, pretender to the imperial throne of France. Thus almost under the same roof dwelt these two haughty old dames, the fiery Republican and the strict Bonapartist.

Monsieur Léger's parents also owned for many years an estate at Bry sur Marne about fourteen miles from Paris. Near by was the finest private estate in France, Château de Ferrière, property of Alphonse Rothschild. This domain was on a magnificent scale; the green-houses with their fruits and flowers, the lawns diversified by streams, the vast hunting grounds were all of royal proportions. Here William I of Prussia passed the winter of 1871. The Marne is a picturesque river and Bry a fertile, hilly country. This is the same Marne which has said to the Hun to-day, "Thou shalt not pass." Monsieur Léger liked to recall boyhood days at Bry sur Marne.

After we became good friends he would sometimes sing for us quaint French songs with which he had been familiar as a child. He had a sweet, dim voice. It sounded like a spirit sighing for past happy days.

Many times since the Huns have entered upon their cathedral devastation, we have recalled our old French friend and his little song:—

Les petits Oiseaux de Notre Dame.

“ Sous les arceaux de Notre Dame
Des nids d’oiseaux se sont blottis,
Anges nouveaux chantant leur gamme,
Comme en un coin du Paradis.

“ Je les ai vus là sans surprise,
Ne sont-ils pas enfants du ciel?
Et se loger dans une église
C’était pour eux bien naturel.

“ Petits oiseaux dont le chant est si doux,
Dans vos chansons priez pour nous—”

Poor little birds nesting in the cathedrals of France, what are your songs to-day? “Priez pour nous!”

CATHERINE BEACH ELY.

New York City.